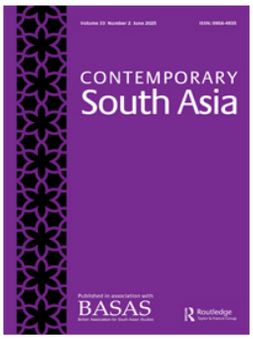

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Resistance as negotiation: making states and tribes in the margins of modern India

by Uday Chandra, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2024, xv + 320 pp., $75.00 (Hardcover), ISBN: 9781503638112

Sufal Bepari

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The book includes seven 'atmospheric entanglements', each covered in a chapter. Three chapters ('Breath', 'Air', 'Clouds') explore connections between climate, bodies, and emotions. Three others ('Dust', 'Mud', 'Forests') examine materials that challenge boundaries. All six relate to TB and care in Ambawati. The final chapter, 'Afterlife', explores how matter merges with death, memory, and life, questioning biomedical views of TB. Chapter 2, 'Breath' focuses on a TB patient and his family, exploring their understanding of breath as both a vital force and a transcendent element.

The book situates illness within broader socio-political contexts. Devi Singh's struggle with multi drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) becomes a lens through which the author examines caste, kinship, and structural inequalities. Similarly, Rai Singh's leadership and familial struggles represent the relational web that braces life in Ambawati. The narrative's refusal to linearize illness aligns with its critical examination of biopolitical models that hierarchize reproduction and containment over the lived realities of patients. Another strength lies in the book's engagement with public health infrastructures. The account of Rai Singh's preference for dying at home over encountering the hospital's 'haunting reality' is a sharp indictment of systemic neglect. The atmospheric lens – where microbes, air quality, and social inequalities collide – emerges as a vital framework for rethinking care. This interpretation gains urgency in the chapters addressing COVID-19, where the Delta variant's spread highlights perpetual injustices in health governance and resource distribution.

The narrative's multi-scalar approach – linking individual suffering to planetary concerns – is thought-provoking. The discussion of antimicrobial resistance and the call for patient-centred approaches accentuates the need for collective responsibility in addressing health crises. By foregrounding breath as a shared, more-than-human phenomenon, the book opens pathways for reimagining public health as an ethical and relational practice.

The book balances rich ethnography with poignant theoretical intellect, particularly in its dealing with personal experiences. At times, the density of concepts might challenge readers unfamiliar with interdisciplinary approaches, but the effort is richly rewarded. The work's interdisciplinarity–drawing from anthropology, public health, and even afterlife – makes it an essential contribution to contemporary debates on care, contagion, and inequality.

This book is based on the experiences of TB patients and targets a small community who share the same experiences regarding the interconnectedness of breath, illness, and care. By challenging biomedicine's reductionist models, the author offers a vision of care that is ethical, ecological, and deeply human. Instead of viewing TB via a tunnel vision as an air borne disease, he chose to explore it's social and political aspects like that of a living entity which has atmospheric entanglements just like any other human. It is an urgent, necessary work for anyone grappling with the complexities of life, death, and the spaces in between.

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Resistance as negotiation: making states and tribes in the margins of modern India, by Uday Chandra, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2024, xv + 320 pp., $75.00 (Hardcover), ISBN: 9781503638112

Scholarly investigations of tribal communities often portray these communities as 'primitive,' distinct from modern beings and needing protection to achieve civilisation. Their relationship with the state

is often viewed as antagonistic, marked by persistent resistance to such authority. This book – the result of Uday Chandra's 15 years of painstaking work, supplemented by ethnographic studies in tribal villages of Jharkhand, India – challenges these entrenched ideas by instead exploring 'tribal modernity'. Chandra offers groundbreaking perspectives that are essential for re-examining adivasi histories and understanding their contemporary dynamics in India.

The book is divided into eight chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction outlines the author's key arguments. In the first chapter, Chandra examines the socioreligious traditions of 'polycentric' precolonial Chotanagpur to demonstrate that tribals did not live in isolation and the region was never marginal. It was the negotiations between adivasis and colonial masters in the form of the Kol Insurrection of 1830–1832 that marked the breakdown of the old order and initiated the formation of 'tribal margins' alongside colonial state-building. The second chapter, on the other hand, explores the paternalistic nature of the colonial administration in Chotanagpur, driven by the ideology of 'primitivism' to civilise 'wild' subjects through commerce and Christianity. However, when this ideology faced backlash, it empowered tribal subjects to negotiate state power from below, as exemplified by the Santal Hul of 1855, which the author argues was not an anti-colonial struggle.

To advance his argument, Chandra reinterprets the Sardar Larai of the Mundas in the 1870s and 1880s and the uprising led by Birsa Munda from 1895 to 1901 in the third chapter. Here, Chandra shows that tribal society and movements were neither homogeneous nor consistent, and that the transition from peaceful agitation to violent activism was complementary, with both seeking to negotiate with modern states rather than overthrow them. Following this, the fourth chapter discusses the reconstitution of tribal margins in late colonial Chotanagpur through the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) of 1908 and the reinforcement of colonial 'primitivism' in light of new ethnographic findings. In addition to this, chapter four sheds light on the Tana Bhagat movement, led by those unsatisfied with the CNTA, and the activities of newly formed political associations, further reaffirming the author's key arguments.

The fifth chapter examines the juncture at which tribal margins travelled from colonial to postcolonial India, highlighting how the colonial protectionist policy for adivasis was upheld by the postcolonial state, which led to tribal leaders like Jaipal Singh struggling to fully meet their demands in negotiations with the constitution's framers, a failure ultimately sealed by the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC). To scrutinise the interplay of 'state-making and adivasi subject-making' in early postcolonial India, the sixth chapter, after pointing out the epistemological weaknesses and undesirable side effects of the Indian state's tribal policies and the limitations of the existing 'internal colonialism' thesis, interrogates the Koel-Karo anti-dam agitation to show how adivasis bargained with the state using their 'culture and community,' mutually constituting each other.

Going forward, Chandra explores the association between peaceful and violent methods of subaltern claim-making in the seventh chapter. In doing so, he investigates the presence of Maoism in Jharkhand and concludes the following. Firstly, Maoist activities complement earlier peaceful tribal movements. Secondly, adivasi youth join Maoist ranks not to overthrow the Indian government but to break from traditional structures and establish new political authority. Finally, NGOs such as Utthaan, active for decades in rural Jharkhand, are not apolitical but act as catalysts in escalating social conflicts. In the eighth and final chapter, Chandra shares insights from his ethnographic study of the political economy of forests in Jharkhand, focusing on the lac production industry. Chandra's findings illuminate the operation of 'multiple and shared sovereignties' – the state, Maoist rebels, and NGOs – that create new political orders amid violent conflict, competing and collaborating simultaneously.

The concluding section summarises the text and sets the tone for future dialogues. By crossing disciplinary boundaries, the book offers a fascinating read on adivasi histories and contemporaries in India, providing new theoretical tools useful for re-interrogating not only tribals but all those known as 'subalterns,' and for a renewed understanding of the resistance of the ruled against their rulers in any context, surpassing the constraints of the status quo.

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Caste, marginalisation, and resistance: the politics of identity of the Naths (Yogis) of Bengal and Assam, by Kunal Debnath, Leiden, Brill, 2024, xx + 240 pp., €131 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-68937-4

This book is a pioneering work that explores the neglected and under-researched social and political history of the Naths (Yogis). This study is unlike many others that have focused on Naths' literary and spiritual accomplishments, propounded by the venerated sannyasins Matsyendranatha and Gorakshanatha.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first chapter identifies research problems and explains why the Naths have not been extensively studied to date. The author claims that the Naths are one of the most neglected communities in Bengal and Assam, both academically, socially, economically and politically.

The second chapter examines whether the Naths are a caste or a religious sect. Unlike the popular view that they are ascetics, Debnath concentrates on non-ascetic householder Naths, their caste identity and their politics of recognition. This chapter illustrates how the Nath-Yogis were socio-economically and politically excluded by Brahmins with the help of royal patronage as well as reforms which allowed them to take control over religious and economic spaces. Based on extensive field studies and historical analysis, Debnath convincingly shows that the Naths in Bengal and Assam function primarily as a caste.

The third and fourth chapters examine attempts to raise the social standing of the Naths, as well as resisting their low ranking, during various colonial censuses in Bengal and Assam respectively. The author illustrates that, after establishing caste associations in both states, the Naths contested their low caste status during colonial and post-colonial periods. These associations gave ideological support, created awareness about caste and mobilised lay members. The contemporary divide between the 'radical' and 'pragmatic' Naths who are respectively against and in favour of the OBC status reveals a deeper debate around reservations.

The fifth chapter outlines the complex socio-economic positioning of the Naths in Bengal and Assam. This chapter highlights caste consciousness between the Naths in Assam versus those in Bengal; the former are more conscious of their caste status during social interactions, while the latter focus on individual identity claims. This sophisticated chapter offers insight into how space and history shape caste dynamics and arguments over identities.

In the sixth chapter, Debnath shows that, in Bengal and Assam, unlike the Namasudras and Rajbanshis of West Bengal, and the Lingayats of Karnataka, the Nath-Yogis were unable to bargain politically because of low levels of politicisation, lack of consolidation, lack of enthusiastic leadership, and absence of dominant associations. Debnath notes that the Nath-Yogis had cordial relations with various northern Indian royal courts, including those in Bengal during ancient and medieval times, and the Gorakhpur Math became highly politicised during the colonial period.

The seventh chapter critically appraises the historical exclusion of the Nath-Yogis, spanning three different historical epochs, starting from the rule of King Vallalasena during the early medieval period to the colonial and post-colonial periods. This chapter also points out how political authority and regal patronage waned in favour of Brahmins, as opposed to the Naths leading to their decimation.